

Why I believe

Mark 1: 14-20

Acts 2: 22-47

21 February 2021

WHCC

We are in a series called: Reasons to believe.

In week 1 we looked at Why I believe – looking at Creation

In week 2 Why I believe – looking at the written word of Scripture

In week 3 Why I believe – looking at the life and ministry of Jesus

And today we look at Why I believe – looking at the Apostles and the early church and how that applies to you and me.

Why I believe – my testimony:

I emigrated from the Netherlands to New Zealand in 1981. As I was on my own, I needed to make friends. I could choose between making friends in the Glenview pub, or in a Christian environment. I chose the church. I found a friendly church in Hamilton and settled in, and got to know plenty of nice people, I became a Sunday school teacher, youth group leader, Church Council member, Youth for Christ leader.

Thinking I wanted to become a youth group leader I joined the BCNZ in 1984. After 6 months they found out that I wasn't a Christian. I had had a lot of experiences but actually had no knowledge or understanding about faith and Jesus. They told me to read a book: *Who rolled the Stone* by Frank Morison. As Michael told us a couple of weeks ago – the writer was an atheist and he was going to write about Jesus' last days and that the Resurrection wasn't true. As he studied all of this, something happened to him, and to me as well, as I read the book. I understood. I was convinced about the truth of the resurrection. The result was that I accepted Jesus as my Lord.

So, let's look at the first apostles and the early church. What was it about these early Christians and their life that is a challenge to us and what we believe.

1^{stly}, these first disciples are a challenge to us because: they were transformed and **became convinced** of what they believed in.

We saw that the first disciples were ordinary Jewish citizens – fishermen. In other Gospels we also read that one sat under a tree; another was a tax-collector. They had different personalities and temperaments. One

was over-confident, two craved special recognition, one was sceptical, and another was self-serving. Even though they were with Jesus for 3 years almost daily, listening to His teaching and seeing Him work signs and wonders, they didn't change much over those 3 years.

At the crucifixion they scattered. They were like sheep without a shepherd and they seem to have forgotten what Jesus had told them. On Easter Sunday three women went to the grave and seeing it empty, raced back to tell the disciples. Only Peter and John decided to go and see for themselves.

That night the fear-stricken disciples met with their Lord as He showed them his pierced hands and feet. The resurrection convinced them that Jesus was Lord. He was the Messiah. They realised his message was trustworthy. And that was the beginning of the seed of faith being planted that lead to their transformation that would make them courageous proclaimers and defenders of Christ's resurrection.

Because they believed, others believed.
Because they were convinced, others were convinced.

2^{ndly}, these early Christians are a challenge to us because: **they became transformed in the way they lived.** The new community shared everything

Because they had faith and confidence in Christ and the Gospel, they became transformed. They were able to live a lifestyle that was so different to those around them, that others were attracted to the Good News of the Gospel. Acts says: *they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* 2:42

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions, they gave to anyone in need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Praising God and enjoying favour of all the people. 2:44-47

For the disciples and the early Christians, to share in the mission of Jesus, meant being together and joining in the ministry of teaching, listening to the preaching, meeting with each other, eating together, having Communion, sharing and serving. They did this through their words, action and behaviour. And because they did that, it is no wonder that they praised God with glad, sincere and joyful hearts.

They started something that was counter-cultural. They shared everything as they looked after each other and the needs that each had. No one lacked anything. They had an exciting message of love and forgiveness, grace and hope. This was attractive to their neighbours, friends and family and so this new counter-cultural community grew.

3^{rdly}, these early Christians are a challenge to us because: **they became bold as they shared their faith to the point of suffering.**

Instead of being full of fear and doubt, they became courageous proclaimers of Jesus' love and forgiveness, His grace and hope. Even to martyrdom. Others were moved by their bold witness – and as Luke writes in Acts, people were moved by the signs and wonders.

In Acts 2 we read Peter's sermon on Pentecost Day, where he boldly proclaimed the message about Christ's resurrection and that the people needed to repent and be baptised – and 3,000 responded. But, 50 days before, Peter had denied Jesus 3 times and now he was speaking boldly
Acts 2: 36. How is this possible? The disciples and these believers went all around the Mediterranean Sea and through their words and their changed transformed behaviour, others came to know Christ as well. This was upsetting to the Jewish leaders and so they persecuted the believers.

Later, Peter and John could stand before the religious rulers and elders and say without fear: *For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.* Acts 4:20

Peter writes later: *We did not invent cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.* 2 Peter 1:16

Twenty years or so after Christ's resurrection, Paul, the onetime persecutor of the Christians, defended the historical fact of Christ's resurrection. He told the sceptics in Corinth that the risen Christ *appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at one time, some of whom are still living,* ... 1 Corinthians 15:6

The appearance of Christ's physical resurrected body transformed their fear and doubt into boldness. During the 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus, through His teaching, enabled the disciples to understand why He had to suffer and die and rise again. The disciples became confident

in the message of Jesus and this confidence fueled their faith. Enabled by the Holy Spirit, the disciples were motivated and empowered to take risks, to step out in faith and to proclaim the message of Jesus without fear.

1. The disciples and the early church believers had faith and were transformed and became convinced of what they believed.
2. Because of this transformation they lived in a counter-cultural way.
3. That transformation also meant that they became bold in their message and that they shared their faith to the point of martyrdom.

The outcome was that the Gospel spread. Not only the 12 believed but it is amazing that because of them, many believed. Their society was changed.

Some believed because they had an encounter with Jesus. Others believed because they were convinced about who Jesus was. Others believed because they observed the transformed lifestyle, or because of the powerful testimony and words, the signs and wonders.

The Gospel not only went out to their own people; the Jews who lived in Jerusalem or around the Mediterranean Sea – but it also spread among the Gentiles; the Roman and Greek population these early believers lived among. It spread from a Jewish sect to an international religion in the matter of decades.

So, what about us? Why and What do we believe?

Why do I believe and why do I follow Jesus?

Ask yourself: Why do I believe and follow Jesus?

Take a couple of minutes to think about that. People in the early church heard Jesus' call, stopped what they were doing and followed Him. Paul had an encounter with Christ on the Road to Damascus. Millions of other Christians throughout history heard and followed Jesus.

As we have seen through this series, some people believe by looking at Creation, others by reading the OT, or through an encounter with Jesus but, why do you believe and follow Jesus? 1-2 minutes

Now I ask you to share your answer with your neighbour.

“Tell me in a few words, Why do you believe and follow Jesus?”

Because Jesus called me to follow Him; bec. I need a Guide in my life; bec. I can't live this life on my own; bec. Jesus is my friend; bec. I want to know God.

And, what do we believe in? Every Sunday we read the Creed – but if I would stop you on the road and ask you, what do you believe? What would you say that you believe in – just in one short sentence?

I'll give you a few minutes to think about that question: What is the Creed in your own words – what is your belief, what is your faith based on, what do you believe in - in a dozen words or less?

Talk with your neighbour about what you have come up with.

Jesus is Lord; Jesus is the Way, Truth and Life; Jesus is my purpose in life, my goal;

I'm sure the first disciples and early church had to ask these same questions. Why do I believe and What do I believe?

In our Gospel reading we saw that they met Jesus and followed Him. Their encounter with Jesus lasted 3 years. But it wasn't until after the resurrection that they began to understand the Gospel message – the message that started with creation then the fall, and had its climax with Jesus coming and living among us.

It is true that understanding takes time – faith needs to grow. The disciples spent 40 concentrated days with Jesus. After Paul's Damascus experience, he spent 3 years in the dessert, coming to understand this message of Jesus of love and forgiveness.

But the amazing thing is that this Gospel message changed not only their own lives. It gave them a desire to see the lives of others changed as well. They wanted others to come to know Jesus as well and for that to happen, they went out and told others. Not only their words but their lifestyle drew people in.

Our lives

And that change and transformation needs to happen in our lives as well. After our initial experience and encounter with Jesus we start the journey to follow Him. This is our testimony

But we can't solely live of that 1st experience. Over time along the journey, our 1st experience needs knowledge. We need to know about

Jesus and the teaching of Jesus from reading the Gospels and listening to sermons, by being mentored, or by doing a discipleship course. We need to grow in knowledge. Which is my testimony – it was experience only, lacking knowledge and understanding.

Then, like those 1st disciples, we will be so taken with the message of Jesus, we will want to share it with others. We will want to live in a way that draws others to Him. Then we too will challenge and change society.

And that is the crux of the matter. Like the disciples and early church Christians, are we willing to be so transformed by Christ that we will be contra-cultural in our behaviour, in our thinking, in our talking – so that others are drawn to Jesus?

Henri Nouwen writes 13/02/21 <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgxwLsSczkntnVgZCBhTvlKLHslzg>

Whenever, contrary to the world's vindictiveness, we love our enemy, we exhibit something of the perfect love of God, whose will is to bring all human beings together as children of one Father.

Whenever we forgive instead of getting angry at one another,
bless instead of cursing one another,
tend one another's wounds instead of rubbing salt into them,
hearten instead of discouraging one another,
give hope instead of driving one another to despair,
hug instead of harassing one another,
welcome instead of cold-shouldering one another,
thank instead of criticizing one another,
praise instead of maligning one another . . .
in short,
whenever we opt for and not against one another,

we make God's unconditional love visible;
we are diminishing violence and giving birth to a new community.

Amen